

Promoting healthy summer sleep routines for your family

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The lazy days of summer can be peaceful and relaxing, but they also can wreak havoc on your body's internal clock. Longer days, evening outdoors activities and a lack of school the next morning can throw even the most conscientious family's sleep schedules out of whack.

Dr. Cheryl Tierney, chief of behavior and developmental pediatrics at Penn State Children's Hospital, said it's unrealistic to expect children and parents to keep the same rigid school year schedule during the [summer](#) months.

But that doesn't mean summer should turn into a sleep in free-for-all that ends with a rough crash back to reality come Labor Day.

"It's about having a balance," she said. "Compromise is reasonable."

Younger children often wake up at the same time every day, whether they have to go to school or not. When they are going to bed later, it means they simply get less sleep. That can produce the same types of problems adults have when they skimp on shut-eye—irritability, headaches and difficulty paying attention.

"Children can get short-tempered as the day goes on," she said. "Instead of looking like they need a nap, it can look a lot like attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder in some younger children."

Tierney said that behavior lessens with a good night's sleep.

"You are more attentive, clear headed and better able to consolidate your learning when you are rested," she explained. "Your memory also improves with sleep. You can process information and make decisions more efficiently."

She recommends younger children keep closer to their regular sleep schedule—going to bed no more than an hour past their normal time. Depending on their biology and [natural circadian rhythms](#), older middle schoolers through high school children can push that a bit.

However, older children should not stay up more than two hours past their regular bedtime.

"Otherwise, it can creep later and later until they are staying up all night and sleeping the day away," Tierney said.

A compromise might be for them to get out of bed at 9 a.m. if they typically get up at 6 a.m. for school but would prefer to stay in bed until noon. Another option is to stick to a regular [schedule](#) during the week and be more relaxed on weekends.

Children older than 5 or 6 should avoid afternoon napping because it can make it more difficult for them to fall asleep at night.

Children who get physical activity during the day and avoid the use of electronic devices in the evening may find it easier to go to sleep at a more reasonable hour. Not eating a large meal before bed and keeping the bedroom cool and dark also can promote good [sleep](#) habits during the summer months.

Tierney recommends parents gradually push [children](#) closer to their school-year bedtimes beginning two weeks before the start of [school](#): "That will make the transition easier," she said.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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